

February 2015

# Feeding back to feed forward: Formative assessment as a platform for effective learning

Lucy Wheatley

Cardiff Metropolitan University, lwheatley@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Alex McInch

University of Gloucestershire, amcinch@glos.ac.uk

Scott Fleming

Cardiff Metropolitan University, sfleming@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Rhiannon Lord

Abertay University, r.lord@abertay.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <http://uknowledge.uky.edu/kjhepp>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Wheatley, Lucy; McInch, Alex; Fleming, Scott; and Lord, Rhiannon (2015) "Feeding back to feed forward: Formative assessment as a platform for effective learning," *Kentucky Journal of Higher Education Policy and Practice*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <http://uknowledge.uky.edu/kjhepp/vol3/iss2/2>

This Peer Reviewed Articles and Commentaries is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kentucky Journal of Higher Education Policy and Practice by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu).

## Feeding back to feed forward: Formative assessment as a platform for effective learning

### **Abstract**

Students construct meaning through relevant learning activities (Biggs, 2003) which are largely determined by the type, amount, and timing of feedback (Carless, 2006). The aim of the present study was to develop a greater awareness and understanding of formative assessment and feedback practices and their relationship with learning. During 2011, five focus group discussions were undertaken with students and academic staff involved with a range of modules and degree pathways at a UK University. Three of the focus groups were with undergraduate students (one at each level of study), and one was with taught postgraduate students. Discussions focussed on integration of formative assessment and feedback into modules, as well as an exploration of the effectiveness of feedback on future learning. The findings revealed that in order to emphasise continuous learning—feeding back to feed forward (Rushton, 2005)—and to encourage self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), students need to have opportunities to make mistakes and to learn from them prior to summative assessment (through formative assessment and feedback). There was also firm evidence of different approaches to learning, emphasising in particular the transitional importance of the first year of study as the foundation upon which future achievement is built.

**Key words:** feedback, formative assessment, higher education, learning

Teaching is a catalyst for learning, and “meaning” is constructed by the student in higher education (HE) through relevant learning activities (Biggs, 2003; Nicol, 1997). The construction of such “meaning” is largely determined by the type, amount, and timing of feedback which is crucial to the development of deep and effective lifelong learning (Carless, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Rushton, 2005). In order to emphasise continuous learning — feeding back to feed forward (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Rushton, 2005) — and to encourage self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), it is important to provide opportunities for students to make mistakes and learn from them prior to summative assessment. However, questions remain about the effectiveness and implementation of this form of assessment and feedback. The aim of the present study was therefore to develop a greater awareness and understanding of formative assessment and feedback practices and their relationship with learning. The following questions provided a starting point for further exploration: “What do students think about particular evaluation methods? How do they experience certain assessment modes? What methods do they favour and why?” (Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005, p.329) and “How do students perceive the feedback process? To what extent are students’ perceptions different from tutors? What are the implications for enhancing the feedback process?” (Carless, 2006, p.221).

This paper presents the findings of a research project that focused on modes of assessment and types of feedback across a range of modules and degree pathways within a “post-1992” higher education institution (HEI)<sup>1</sup> in the UK. Specifically, there was an emphasis on the ways in which formative assessment and feedback were integrated into modules coupled with an exploration of the effectiveness of feedback on future learning.

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Post 1992 UK higher education institution’ refers specifically to the Higher Education Act (1992), whereby former polytechnics and colleges of higher education were given university status by the government.

Similar to many HEIs in the UK, undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes of study comprise modules (or “units”). Each one is a subject-specific block of learning carrying a credit value that led to either progression and/or an award classification. Although some modules are pre-requisites for later modules, and others are co-requisites with modules studied concurrently, all modules have learning outcomes that are assessed. A threshold level of academic performance is required in order for the module to be passed and the credit for that module awarded.

Based on a series of focus group discussions, the empirical work addressed the extent to which formative assessment and feedback occurred in one faculty at Riverton University (a pseudonym) and the perceptions of both staff and students regarding the concept of feedback (types, timing, and amount of feedback) and its effectiveness (impact on learning) in relation to formative and summative assessment. This is followed by some concluding remarks about the impact and implications of the findings for both Riverton University and HEIs more generally. First, however, there is a synthesis and review of some of the key literature sources.

## **Conceptual Background**

### **Learning Approaches in Higher Education**

In recent years there has been a shift away from tutor transmission of information and knowledge toward student-centred learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; DeCorte, 1996; Nicol, 1997; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Student-centred learning is a process whereby students construct their own knowledge and skills. However, this focus is overshadowed by grading and final certification that often characterise HE environments (Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991; Marton & Säljö, 1997; Ramsden, 1997). Indeed, Taras (2002) argued that there are “contradictions between aims and pedagogic processes in British universities ... [which] are probably an important factor undermining development in higher education” (p.501). In turn, these conflicting aims have led to a paradigm shift in HE towards certification through deep

learning (Boud, 2000). A pragmatic view has been taken by lecturers and tutors that provision should be made for deep student learning alongside assessment for certification (Boud, 2000).

An adapted version of Entwistle, McCune, and Walker's (2001) model of student approaches to learning includes three tiers. The first, a surface approach to learning, enables a student to complete a given task but with little engagement with the work. This is often associated with memorization and traditional examination processes. Assessments designed with this form of learning approach in mind are viewed by students as an unwelcome imposition with little value to their future development (Struyven et al., 2005). The second tier, a deep approach to learning, generally results in a more profound level of understanding that is highly influential in summative assessments (i.e., assessments that contribute to final certification) and future development. In the final tier, strategic approaches to learning are adopted by students who are trying to achieve the highest possible certification grade. These learners manage their time and study methods in order to achieve this. This may include both a surface and deep approach to learning, depending on the nature of assessment.

These conceptual distinctions are helpful because they highlight that approaches to learning are not static and fixed. Rather, they are fluid and dynamic processes modified in accordance with the context and tasks the learner is experiencing (Struyven et al., 2005). Hence, the learning approach adopted is influenced by the particular requirements of the assessment task, in addition to other factors such as time constraints and personal motivation as well as overall workload (Sambell, McDowell & Brown, 1997; Drew, 2001). All of these factors are liable to change over time, and thus, the learning approach adopted at any one time is also subject to change.

### **Assessment and feedback in Higher Education**

The most recognisable and established mode of assessment within HE has been summative in nature. With the intention of producing marks or grades that will ultimately

contribute to a final grading, assessments are often based on examinations (e.g., essay based, short answer and multiple choice questions) that are generally underpinned by surface approaches to learning (Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991; Struyven et al., 2005). Opportunities to receive feedback on examination performance are infrequent or non-existent (Carless, 2006; Drew, 2001), yet there is a general acceptance that assessment and feedback are central to student learning and performance (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Chanock, 2000; Cross, 1996; Falchikov & Thompson, 1996; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hattie, Biggs & Purdie, 1996; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001, 2002; Ramsden, 2003; Yorke, 2003). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2006) makes the principle explicit: “Institutions provide appropriate and timely feedback to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement, but does not increase the burden of assessment” (p. 13). This aspiration can be achieved (at least in part) by the introduction of formative assessment.

Formative assessment allows judgments about the quality of a learner’s responses to the learning process (e.g., performance and assignments) to be made. Often through the use of exemplars, formative assessment allows students to become familiar with the expectations and requirements associated with assessment processes, as well as the judgment criteria and standards used to evaluate the work (Drew, 2001; Taras, 2002). Generally thought to be more beneficial to learners (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Boud, 2000; Taras, 2002; McMillan, 2007; Race, 2007; Irons, 2008), it is often implemented prior to summative assessments to allow students to make mistakes and obtain feedback (to feed forward) in order to improve (Rushton, 2005). Feedback from formative assessment can be used to direct and shape future responses through a better understanding of the assessment expectations, briefing, and criteria (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 1989).

Under these two overarching assessment themes, there now exists a wider repertoire of assessment methods in HE than ever before (Struyven et al., 2005), and it is commonplace in British HEIs for both formative and summative forms of assessment to be used alongside one another (Boud, 2000). The intention is that, together, they fulfill the pragmatic approach to provide deep, lifelong learning in HE in conjunction with assessment for certification (Barr & Tagg, 1995; DeCorte, 1996; Nicol, 1997; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Examples of current formative assessment (and feedback) practices include annotated scripts (both coursework and exam), individual and group feedback sheets, marking grids, model answers, statement banks, demonstrations, peer evaluation and feedback, tutorials, and various electronic assessment mechanisms (Irons, 2008).

### **Student perceptions of assessment and formative feedback**

During the last two decades there has been increasing attention to the links between students' preferences about assessment and feedback — which are closely linked to their approach to learning (Entwistle & Tait, 1990; 1995; Struyven et al., 2005). For example, students have indicated that they favour peer- and self-assessment, portfolios, and essay assignments (Boud, 1995; 2000; Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; Segers & Dochy, 2001; Slater, 1996). These assessment methods develop self-assessment skills and lead to personal development and enhanced student achievement (Boud, 1995; Drew, 2001; Pintrich & Zusho, 2002). They are associated with deep approaches to learning (Sambell et al., 1997) but tend to be used in formative rather than summative assessments (Taras, 2002). For this reason there has been a parallel shift towards formative assessment in HE (Sadler, 1998; Yorke, 2003) in order to encompass the dual aims of HE (i.e., deep, lifelong learning and achievement of certification). This has also coincided with the development of what Boud (2000) has called “a learning society”—a holistic approach to formative assessment that incorporates the views of

all involved in the process (tutors, learners, and peers) and one which moves the learning focus away from tutors and teaching towards lifelong learning in wide-ranging environments.

It is widely acknowledged that effective feedback is the most important aspect of the formative assessment process (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Carless, 2006; Dweck, 1999; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hattie et al., 1996; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998; Ramsden, 2003; Rushton, 2005). When administered well, formative feedback is highly beneficial to learners. It contrasts with summative feedback which many students have found dissatisfying by failing to provide specific advice on improvement (Chanock, 2000; James, 2000). The essence of formative feedback is captured by Hounsell (2003, p. 67) who argued with reassuring simplicity that “we learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might need to do in order to improve.” Importantly too, effective formative feedback informs the student about the current state of learning and performance and how these relate to goals and standards (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Irons, 2008).

A cornerstone of formative feedback is that it has to be an internalised process that is evident in future work or performance in order for it to be effective (Boud, 2000; Sadler, 1989; Taras, 2002), yet the internalisation of feedback processes can be problematic when delivered in the context of student lives and priorities (Drew, 2001). In order to cultivate a stronger commitment to the idea of a learning society and to internalising feedback, some pedagogic research projects have been undertaken within which marks / grades have been withheld until there has been adequate engagement with the formative feedback provided to students (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Boud, 2000; Sadler, 1989; Taras, 2002). The argument, which when converted into an operational action research intervention, is relatively straightforward: through engagement with feedback students improve their future performances and achieve greater success in summative assessments.



It is against this conceptual backdrop of increasing interest in and commitment to enhancing student learning that the present empirical study was undertaken. Focusing on a large HE provider of sport and exercise programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels during May and June of 2011, the project was funded by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Fund, Wales, UK. After a short procedural account of the research design, the main findings of the study are presented, before conclusions and directions for future research.

### **Method**

With the aim of developing a greater awareness and understanding of formative assessment and feedback practices and their relationship with learning, a flexible research design was adopted that allowed for the careful consideration of the existing themes and issues that had arisen in previous studies and were identified in the previous section and also permitted the exploration of new insights. The empirical research was undertaken at a UK HEI in a well-established major provider of sport-related programmes (see Quality Assurance Agency, 2008) for over sixty years. It incorporated a series of focus group discussions with students as well as embraced the views of academic staff responsible for the delivery of learning experiences.

### **Procedures**

Having first secured ethical approval for the project from the Riverton University Research Ethics Committee, student participants were recruited by volunteering to participate in response to an email sent to all members of each cohort. Later, members of academic staff responsible for the delivery of learning, teaching, and assessment for the student participants were recruited through "convenience sampling" (Stangor, 1998). Through a series of focus groups, qualitative data were gathered from two different constituencies of participants: (i) those who facilitate student learning (lecturers or tutors); and (ii) the learners themselves (students). Five focus groups were undertaken in total. Three were with undergraduate students at level four or full-time year one (n=3), level five or full-time year two (n=3), level six or full-

time year three (n=4), and one with taught postgraduate students (n=4). Together, the 14 students were aged 18 to 22, six were male and eight were female. These are representative of the cohorts of students concerned inasmuch as they are typical types, that is to say, they are indicative of many others like them. Module leaders identified in these student focus groups were subsequently invited to a further focus group (n=3). All of these leaders were aged 30 to 44; one was male and two were female. Each participant also agreed to observe “Chatham House rules” – that is to say, views expressed were not attributed to any particular person (see Fleming, Jones, McNamee, Pill, & Shire, 2004).

The focus group discussions were based jointly on the key themes and issues identified in the literature (reviewed above) and the experiences of both the project team student members and members of the Faculty’s Assessment Working Group at Riverton University. A consistent “guide” was used for each student focus group. Broadly, it focused on learning environments, effective learning, module delivery and assessment types, nature and purpose of feedback received, uses to which feedback is put, and features of good practice (see Appendix 1). All focus groups were recorded on a digital recording device and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then the focus of an inductive content analysis. The primary purpose of this approach is to permit the frequent or dominant research findings to emerge from the raw data. Hartas (2010, p. 11) explains that “a category or code is a concept that describes some recurring feature of the data. Importantly, this type of work should be thought of as procedural, and as concerning the ways that data can be managed.” Mindful of the advice provided by Hartas (2010), a sufficient but not excessive number of mutually exclusive codes was created.

## **Discussion of Findings**

There were five substantive findings that emerged from the analysis of the data that were captured. These enhance an understanding of formative assessment and feedback practices and their relationship with learning. They are over-lapping and linked but are separated into discrete sections for clarity of presentation.

### **The Ambiguity of Feedback**

At the outset, it became clear that many students only considered feedback in relation to summative assessment—this is an important point of departure and sets the context for other findings in the present study as well as providing a focus for initial action arising from it. When asked about the types of feedback they received during the course of the year, students typically referred only to written feedback on assignments together with the opportunity to discuss this feedback with a member of staff if they required further clarification: “We don’t get feedback as such; the only feedback we get is if you’ve had a piece of coursework you get a feedback sheet, that’s the only feedback we get.” Another student explained how they approached their tutor for further clarification regarding written feedback: “I’d had feedback but I didn’t really agree with it or understand it so I went to see her and it did help a lot.” That is not to say that students were not receiving formative feedback throughout the year but, importantly, they did not appear to recognise formative feedback. Indeed, undergraduate students showed some confusion about the terms ‘summative’ and ‘formative’ (though postgraduate students were better informed). This begins to explain, at least in part, the failure to recognise formative feedback when presented with it.

Operational definitions aside, students did agree, however, that they would welcome more frequent opportunities for feedback which allowed them to monitor their progress and enable them to identify areas for development. In other words, whatever it is called, and however much of it they felt they were getting, these students valued (formative) feedback that

enabled and encouraged continual development and learning: “I’m quite keen on oral feedback, perhaps half way through, to tell you how you’re doing, how maybe you could improve by doing such and such.” Moreover, continual development was also considered to be dependent upon the frequency of formative feedback: “I think definitely more frequency of feedback would be helpful, because we tend not to get that much, and most of what you do get is after the assessment has gone in, which isn’t going to help you with that assessment.” The tutors concurred, for though they attempted to provide students with opportunities for formative assessment and feedback, there was some agreement that these practices could be improved. One lecturer explained that, “a lot of assessments are at the end of the year” and added that “ongoing assessment could help to identify what the students need to work on.”

This instrumental approach to student achievement in summative assessment was in itself a powerful driver for using formative assessment and feedback, and given the widespread acknowledgement of their value by tutors and students, the case for their inclusion seems overwhelming. For students, it was a straightforward point—(formative) feedback contributed to their overall module grade because they were more easily able to identify and address the deficiencies in their knowledge and application of that knowledge: “We receive feedback along the way, so that as you’re progressing you learn from your mistakes.” Moreover, whilst generic formative feedback for an entire group was considered by students to carry benefits for their learning, it was *individualised* formative feedback that was most appreciated for it was only this that enabled students to locate their own shortcomings very precisely and hence improve on their learning: “If you got more personal feedback from a lecturer you would probably engage with them more.” There were also examples of how both generic and personalised formative feedback could be integrated into a seminar: “You took your essay... and she read it, she told me what I needed to improve on, and that was the best feedback I had all year. You’re sitting in this room with ten people but she was going round each person individually

and if it was a relevant point she was giving it to the whole group and that was good.” The importance of this perception should not be under-estimated, for whether the benefits that accrue from individualised feedback are indeed greater than from generic feedback is, in one sense, immaterial. It was clear that students believed this distinction to be true, and their expectations were set accordingly.

This outcome-driven approach to formative assessment (i.e., one that depicts formative assessment as a “means to an end” – improved achievement in summative assessment) is compelling. Yet it is apparent that whilst students were driven by the desire to achieve, this did not imply that they only ever adopted a surface or strategic approach to learning. Students suggested that it was the learning that takes place as a result of formative assessment and feedback that contributed to their summative assessment grade. This emphasises the importance of formative assessment and feedback for enhancing deep learning and cultivating Boud’s (2000) “learning society.” In some ways this is an even more compelling argument because it values learning beyond the shallow regurgitation of knowledge for “traditional” modes of assessment (as well as preparing students for them). For these students, the perception of insufficient formative assessment and feedback contributed to a surface or strategic approach to learning, and whether or not the perception was an accurate one, it became real in its consequences. That is to say, regardless of whether these students were actually getting sufficient formative feedback, they adopted particular learning approaches because they *thought* they were not. A greater emphasis on formative assessment and feedback would therefore help to facilitate a positive learning culture, which in turn has direct implications for future learning and academic performance, as well as employability.

### **Feedback as a Continual Learning Platform**

There is strong evidence that learning is a dynamic process modified in accordance with the context and tasks that the learner is experiencing (Struyven et al., 2005). In other words,

the context in which the learner is placed at the time of an assessment will impact greatly on their learning approach. Time constraints and personal motivation (Sambell et al., 1997) as well as workload (Drew, 2001) contribute to the approach a learner will adopt. For example, the majority of students in the present study had a desire to learn but wanted to do so because they wanted to achieve a good degree classification. Therefore, learning was influenced by assessment: “I think with the best will in the world you’re not going to get people going home to answer questions and read around the topic straight after [lectures]. People only read around the topic when it comes to assessment.” However, if students perceive formative assessment and feedback to contribute to continual development and ultimately to summative grades, a greater emphasis on formative assessment and feedback throughout the year is likely to encourage students to read around the subject more frequently rather than strategically waiting until the summative assessment is due. The message is clear; the context in which the learner is placed needs to be considered more carefully, and programmes of study need to be designed to develop deep learners. This requires a move away from tutor transmission of information and knowledge toward student centred learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; DeCorte, 1996; Nicol, 1997; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

### **Stimulating learning environments**

When invited to comment on examples of good practice, on the whole, students agreed that the most effective and enjoyable environments were those with small numbers of students (e.g., seminars and workshops). These environments were also preferred by staff members and considered advantageous for a number of reasons. First, they are more informal and personable: “Because we’re in small numbers, the lecturer gets to know you better and recognises your face and gets to know your name;” it is easier to receive a greater amount of feedback and the feedback is also more explicit. “When they talk to you, you can question that and ask a lot of questions ... you can question and further your learning by asking why the feedback they’ve

given you is that way.” There is also a greater sense of student responsibility and social loafing is less possible (students are recognisable and known so they cannot ‘hide’ within a crowd). “When you walk into a lecture theatre you expect to sit there almost in silence ... whereas, if you walk into a seminar, they’re expecting you to be more problem-focused and think a bit more for yourself;” lastly, it is easier to develop stronger staff-student relationships and also strong peer relationships, and therefore students feel more willing to contribute and ask or answer questions. “In seminars, because there are smaller numbers, you feel a little bit more confident. Maybe in lead lectures there are such large numbers you feel somebody else might laugh at you and you feel a bit embarrassed; you might want to answer, but don’t.”

Needless to say, the traditional didactic lecture environment can and does facilitate learning, and student perceptions are just one indicator of successful and effective teaching methods or environments. It was clear that staff-student relationships were crucial for galvanising students’ efforts and engagement outside of their preferred learning environment (seminars). The approach adopted by one tutor illustrated the effect on some students: “She wants you to get involved with it [the lecture material], so she has a way of asking questions or making you think about things. Other lecturers just tell you and aren’t actually interacting with you whereas she does.” The importance of lecturers’ teaching styles and approaches to lead lectures was reiterated by the majority of students: “In some lead lectures you just look; you don’t really understand and you just go back, whereas in others, the lecturers are quite good at trying to get the students involved. For example, in one module the way in which the lecturer interacts with the group is completely different, moving up and down the aisle, sitting down with the students, and his style is much better so you learn a lot more.” Thus, it appears that although there is some agreement that cultivating engagement is more of a challenge in lead lectures; there is clearly scope to enhance active student participation by altering teaching approaches within that environment.

The centrality of effective learning and teaching relationships between tutors and students was also highlighted by one of the staff members. He remarked on the positive student feedback received about the use of ‘team teaching’ in lead lectures. In certain situations where three or four tutors were present, the staff-student ratio was improved, the environment was more similar to that of a seminar, and the advantages discussed above were more evident.

In the vast majority of HEIs in the UK there are, of course, resource constraints within which programmes must be delivered. A simplistic economic analyses of the cost of student learning sometimes indicate that large staff-student ratios are efficient, and one tutor teaching large groups is cost effective. In reality, however, there are many other costs to consider some more explicit and tangible than others. For example, in the worst case scenarios, there are staff costs associated with students failing to complete modules, being reassessed, being ineligible to progress, and withdrawing from programmes, as well as the damage to student satisfaction (individually and collectively) and reputational harm to the organisation. For these and other reasons, crude numerical indicators of the financial health and sustainability of programmes of study are seldom satisfactory and may lead to false economies. What is clear, however, is that under the UK government’s new tuition fee plan, students are now expected to pay anything up to £9000 per year for tuition, therefore placing further expectations on academics to deliver a high quality service that reflects the cost of higher education.

### **Student engagement**

Whilst tutors were responsible for creating the environment in which learning can take place, it was also recognised that students have a role to play in this process: “If you have a lecturer who delivers the work yet the students don’t become proactive, the lecturers do all the talk and the students don’t do anything, so student engagement I think is key.” Understandably,



students had high expectations of staff; “In terms of what you get out of a session, the quality of teaching is important.” However, these expectations were not always matched by the expectations that undergraduate students had of themselves. The changing nature of the student experience towards greater independence as learners was not appreciated fully by some. Interestingly, and perhaps predictably, the idea of a two-way process was understood better by the postgraduates. One student explained that the feedback provided on return of an assignment had been excellent, but in order to benefit from this feedback, it was incumbent on the student to take the time to digest it and revisit the original piece of work (and perhaps talk it through with a member of staff) in order to ensure continual improvement. “If you actively go out and seek a lecturer, I don’t think I’ve ever been turned down for a meeting or anything like that and I think that’s one of the strengths of the place really, the fact that staff are so accessible and if you are conscientious and you do care, I think they see that and they’re happy to help you as well.”

Given some of the recent attempts within HE to adapt modes of delivery (some might say as a direct response to demand from paying customers), a question remains about the extent to which HEIs are merely reinforcing the high level of dependency created through the current schooling and further education systems in the UK. From the present study, it is clear that the management of students’ expectations makes an important contribution to learning (see also Cross, 1996). One undergraduate explained, “If there’s more of a challenge, then I work harder. In some modules, it just seems like a rehash of A’ level, so I switched off.”

Increasing the level of challenge in assessment may therefore prove beneficial for some students if they are inspired to ‘work harder’ and hence learn more deeply and more effectively. But, this cannot be linked directly and exclusively to an elevation of the minimum threshold for adequacy (i.e., making it more difficult to pass); this would be simplistic and, in the spirit of embracing students’ individual learning needs, even counter-intuitive.

## **Formative Versus Summative Assessment**

It is not just formative assessment practices that are important here. Summative assessment of students' learning needs to be considered carefully. One staff member explained, "[The] use of exams (and the creation of a pressurised environment) are not likely to provide us with a true representation of what students have learnt." A carefully considered modular assessment package that includes a variety of formative and summative assessment modes, as well as opportunities for different types of feedback, would help to develop a culture of deep learning. Moreover, making explicit the criteria associated with excellent work, as well as facilitating and even accelerating the transition to learner independence, would nurture a learning culture in which students are rewarded for fulfilling potential (and not merely demonstrating adequacy).

In many HEIs in the UK, some of these influences are informed as well as constrained by constructive alignment between programme outcomes, module outcomes, and assessment criteria. As such, these are often compliant with guidance in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's subject benchmark statements, as well as the minimum expectations for awards for Bachelor's degrees with honours for the 'subject' of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008).

To this end, the use of peer reviews at all levels as a means of identifying and sharing good practice was also found to be successful in the present study. As one staff member identified, "Sometimes we fail to consider how we might use feedback from staff and students to be more effective in our own teaching."

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to develop a greater awareness and understanding of formative assessment and feedback practices and their relationship with learning. Its findings have a number of implications for policy and practice. First, there is a need to acknowledge the

changing nature of HE and to consider adapting teaching methods, as well as assessment and feedback practices accordingly. In particular, in the planning of the student learning experience overall, HEIs should consider the extent to which they offer students frequent opportunities for formative assessment and feedback. These are key ingredients in the development of a deep approach to learning. It is also important that the perspectives of both students and staff are considered in relation to the development of deep approaches to learning. The transition into HE requires considerable attention with a focus on enhancing the learning environment and reinforcing its importance as the platform upon which success should be built. Specifically, it is now timely to emphasise the nature of challenge and level of expectation to which students are held due to recruitment and retention issues linked to the new tuition fee plan. These form part of the learning culture but can nurture deep learning and, in turn, a learning society. The findings of the present study indicate that formative feedback not only benefits the student, but also benefits the lecturer in terms of charting students' knowledge and achievement at a modular-specific point in time, thereby further motivating students to engage more fully with modular material.

Importantly too, students still value small teaching groups which are perceived, and correctly so, to be beneficial to the learning experience because of the enhanced opportunities for the most specific, individualised feedback. It has been acknowledged that this can sometimes be problematic given the large size of certain modular groupings that adopt a lead-lecture approach; however, the notion of team-teaching can not only enhance formative feedback processes but also the opportunities for teaching staff to provide peer feedback on pedagogic delivery.

This study focused on processes of assessment and feedback strategies and their links to the student learning experience rather than measurable outcomes (i.e., academic achievement). In doing so, it provides an important basis for further research (in particular, a

longitudinal study) to explore the relation between the two. Ultimately, this will contribute to a greater awareness and understanding of formative assessment and feedback practices and their relationship with learning, which will be of benefit to both this institution and the HE sector.

### **Acknowledgements**

The research reported in this paper was funded by Learning and Teaching Enhancement Fund, Wales. We are grateful to the Higher Education Academy for supporting the work and to the academic staff and students at Riverton University who gave their time so generously and shared their views so openly. We are also grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their constructively helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

## References

- Barr, R., & Tagg, J. (1995). A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, 27 (6), 13-25.
- Biggs, J.B. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (3rd ed.). Buckingham, UK: Open University Press/Society for Research into Higher Education.
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5, 7-74.
- Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing learning through self-assessment*. London, UK: Kogan Page.
- Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22, 151-167.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (1999). Peer learning and assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24, 413-426.
- Carless, D. (2006). Differing perceptions in the feedback process. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31, 219-233.
- Chanock, K. (2000). Comments on essays: Do students understand what tutors write? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 5, 95-105.
- Cross, K. (1996). Improving teaching and learning through classroom assessment and classroom research. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- DeCorte, E. (1996). New perspectives on learning and teaching in higher education. In: A. Burgen (Ed.). *Goals and purposes of higher education in the 21st century* (pp. 112-132). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Drew, S. (2001). Perceptions of what helps learn and develop in education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6, 309-331.
- Dweck, C. (1999). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.

- Entwistle, N., & Entwistle, A. (1991). Contrasting forms of understanding for degree examinations: The student experience and its implications. *Higher Education*, 22, 205-227.
- Entwistle, N., McCune, V., & Walker, P. (2001). Conceptions, styles and approaches within higher education: Analytical abstractions and everyday experience. In: R. Sternberg and L-F. Zhang (Eds). *Perspectives on cognitive, learning and thinking styles* (pp. 103-136). London, UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Entwistle, N., & Tait, H. (1990). Approaches to learning, evaluations of teaching, and preferences for contrasting academic environments. *Higher Education*, 19, 169-194.
- Entwistle, N., & Tait, H. (1995). Approaches to studying and perceptions of the learning environment across disciplines. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 64, 93-103.
- Falchikov, N., & Thompson, K. (1996). Approaches to studying and undergraduate well-being. In: G. Gibbs (Ed). *Improving student learning: Using research to improve student learning* (pp. 32-55). Oxford, UK: Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
- Fleming, S., Jones, D., McNamee, M., Pill, A., & Shire, J. (2004). Continuing professional development: Suggestions for effective practice. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28, 165-177.
- Garrison, D.R., & Anderson, T. (2003). *E-Learning in the 21st century: A framework for research and practice*. London, UK: Routledge/Falmer.
- Gibbs, G., & Simpson, C. (2004). Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 1, 3-31.
- Hartas, D. (2010) The epistemological context of quantitative and qualitative research. In: D. Hartas (Ed). *Educational research and inquiry: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (pp. 33-54). London, UK: Continuum Publishing Ltd.

- Hattie, J., Biggs, J., & Purdie, N. (1996). Effects of learning skills intervention on student learning: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 11, 187-212.
- Hattie, J., & Jaeger, R. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning: A deductive approach. *Assessment in Education*, 5, 111-122.
- Higgins, R., Hartley, P., & Skelton, A. (2001). Getting the message across: The problem of communicating assessment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6, 268-274.
- Higgins, R., Hartley, P., & Skelton, A. (2002). The conscientious consumer: Reconsidering the role of assessment and feedback in student learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27, 53-64.
- Higher Education Act (1992). *United Kingdom Act of Parliament*. London, UK: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Hounsell, D. (2003). Student feedback, learning and development. In: M. Slowey and D. Watson (Eds). *Higher education and the lifecourse*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Irons, A. (2008). *Enhancing learning through formative assessment and feedback*. London, UK: Routledge.
- James, D. (2000). Making the graduate: Perspectives on student experience of assessment in higher education. In: A. Filer (Ed). *Assessment: social practice and social product*. London, UK: Routledge Falmer.
- Marton, F., & Säljö, R. (1997). Approaches to learning. In: F. Marton, D. Hounsell and N. Entwistle (Eds). *The experience of learning. Implications for teaching and studying in higher education*. Edinburgh, UK: Scottish Academic Press.
- Maykut, P., & Moorhouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. London, UK: Routledge.

- McMillan, J. H. (ed.) (2007). *Formative classroom assessment: Theory into practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Nicol, D. (1997). *Research on learning and higher education. UCoSDA Briefing Paper 45*. Sheffield, UK: Universities and Colleges Staff Development Agency.
- Nicol, D., & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 2, 199-218.
- Pintrich, P., & Zusho, A. (2002). Student motivation and self-regulated learning in the college classroom. In: J. Smart and W. Tierney (Eds). *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research (Vol. XVII)*. New York, NY: Agathon Press.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2006). *The UK quality code of practice for higher education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code> (accessed: 22/12/2014).
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2008). *Subject benchmark statement – Hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism*. Gloucester, UK: Quality Assurance Association for Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Subject-benchmark-statement-Hospitality-leisure-sport-tourism-2008.pdf> (accessed: 22/12/2014).
- Race, P. (2007). *The lecturer's toolkit: A practical guide to assessment, learning and teaching*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Ramsden, P. (1997). The context of learning in academic departments. In: F. Marton, D. Hounsell and N. Entwistle (Eds.), *The experience of learning. Implications for teaching and studying in higher education* (pp. 39-59). Edinburgh, UK: Scottish Academic Press.



- Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed). London, UK: Routledge Falmer.
- Rushton, A. (2005). Formative assessment: A key to deep learning? *Medical Teacher*, 27, 509-513.
- Sadler, D. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*, 18, 145-165.
- Sadler, D. (1998). Formative assessment: Revisiting territory. *Assessment in Education*, 5, 77-84.
- Sambell, K., McDowell, L., & Brown, S. (1997). 'But is it fair?': An explanatory study of student perceptions of the consequential validity of the assessment. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 23, 349-371.
- Segers, M., & Dochy, F. (2001). New assessment forms in problem-based learning: The value-added of the students' perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26, 327-343.
- Slater, T. (1996). Portfolio assessment strategies for grading first-year university physics students in the USA. *Physics Education*, 31, 329-333.
- Stangor, C. (1998) *Research methods for the behavioural sciences*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Struyven, K., Dochy, F., & Janssens, S. (2005). Students' perceptions about evaluation and assessment in higher education: A review. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30, 325-341.
- Taras, M. (2002). Using assessment for learning and learning from assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27, 501-510.
- Yorke, M. (2003). Formative assessment in higher education: Moves towards theory and enhancement of pedagogic practice. *Higher Education*, 45, 477-501.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Student Focus Group Schedule**

Year of study?

Degree programme?

Modules undertaken this year?

1. Taking each module in turn, tell me / us about:
  - a. The methods of teaching/delivery? (e.g., lead lectures, directed study, seminars, etc.)
  - b. The modes of assessment?
2. Talk to me about how you engage in these different learning environments?
  - a. What are you expected to do during these sessions?
  - b. Do your expectations of how you should engage differ depending on the nature of the session? How does this impact on your learning?
  - c. Which is your preferred learning environment and why?
3. What do you think are the key factors that contribute to effective learning?
  - a. Quality teaching?
  - b. Learning environment?
  - c. Student engagement in challenging learning activities?
  - d. Opportunities to gauge progress and formative assessment?
  - e. Feedback?
4. How would you define:

- a. Assessment?
  - b. Summative assessment?
  - c. Formative assessment?
  - d. Feedback?
    - i. Can you identify different types of feedback and provide examples of when you receive feedback?
  - e. What do you consider the purpose of each of the above
    - i. Why do we incorporate both types of assessment into your studies?  
What is the link between formative assessment, summative assessment and feedback?
5. Talk to me about the opportunity you get to participate in formative forms of assessment in each of your modules?
- a. Examples?
  - b. Types and frequency? Consistent across all modules?
  - c. Do you value and engage with opportunities for formative assessment and why?
  - d. Do you understand why your tutors encourage you to engage with formative assessment?
  - e. Are formative types of assessment clearly linked to the summative assessment(s) you are required to undertake? Can you provide an example?
6. If you are being formatively assessed, would you expect to receive (i) a grade and (ii) feedback? Why?
- a. What type of feedback would you expect to receive and why?
    - i. Written/oral/other/multiple (written and discussion)?

- b. What frequency of feedback would you expect? Why?
  - c. Would you expect feedback from anyone other than a relevant tutor? Why?
  - d. What are your thoughts on receiving feedback from your peers (peer assessment) and yourself (self-assessment)? In what ways might these be useful forms of feedback in relation to your own learning? Can you draw on any experiences from within modules of where you have undertaken peer and self assessment and discuss how this type of feedback is useful (or otherwise)?
  - e. What do you think constitutes good feedback? (frequency, timing, methods, quality?)
7. Referring back to the earlier question about what constitutes effective learning, how important do you consider feedback to be to the development of your learning?
- a. Do you value one type of feedback more than another (formal versus informal/written vs oral)? Why?
  - b. Do you treat formative and summative feedback differently and why? Is one more useful than the other? How?
  - c. What types of comments do you find useful? (positive vs negative).
  - d. Do you value having an opportunity for trial and error (making mistakes but having the chance to learn from them) before you submit a piece of summative work? (i.e. opportunities for formative assessment and feedback). Do you have much opportunity to do this prior to summative assessment? Examples?
  - e. What do you do with feedback once you have received it (written and verbal from tutors and peers)? How does it help you and contribute to your learning? Do you feel that you make progress as a result of acting upon feedback?
  - f. How does feedback impact on your motivation and self-belief?

- g. In your experience so far, have you always had clarity regarding the marking criteria and what you needed to do to achieve a particular grade/mark? Did the feedback you received (formative and summative) allow you to identify the gap between your current and desired performance? Do you use this information in any way?
  - h. Have you or would you seek clarity on the feedback you have received (verbal/written and formative/summative)? Explain.
- 8. Do you use feedback (formative and summative) to understand your grade, to further your learning, or both?
  - a. Do you consider the feedback provided within a specific module and apply it to other modules? i.e. do you think that any elements of feedback are transferable?
- 9. Tell me about the feedback that you have received so far (formative and summative) – is this consistent both within and across modules? (i.e., do you get similar feedback from different tutors within the same module and do you get similar feedback from tutors across a range of modules)? What are the key differences in feedback that you have noticed?
- 10. In what ways do you think the delivery of the module (i.e., teaching methods/type of learning environment) impacts on the type, amount, frequency and quality of feedback received? (e.g., lead lectures versus seminars)

11. Can you highlight any modules that you think are examples of good practice with regard to their assessment and feedback practices (formative and summative) and explain why you think this is the case?
12. Tell me about your experience of school/college and the type of learning environment that was promoted there?
  - a. How does this differ from the learning environment here?
  - b. How would you rate the feedback you received at school/college and why?
  - c. Did you have many opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them?  
Explain.
  - d. How does this differ from your experience here?